

Neo-Khalistan: Religious, Cultural, and the Political Revival of the Sikh Identity

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Abstract

Punjab's history has been marked by turbulence both before and after India's independence. In an environment filled with uncertainty, the Sikh minority has often felt marginalised in post-independence India, leading to several social movements advocating for recognition. One significant movement is the Khalistan movement, which triggered a prolonged insurgency in Punjab and marked one of the bloodiest periods in Indian history. This paper explores the Neo-Khalistan movement as a contemporary revival of Sikh religious, cultural, and political identity, extending beyond mere separatist aims. It traces the movement's roots to the Singh Sabha and Gurdwara Reform movements, illustrating how these historical initiatives have cultivated a unique Sikh consciousness that endures to this day. The study examines the shift from the 1980s Punjab insurgency to advocacy by the Sikh diaspora in countries like Canada, the UK, and the US. Organisations like Sikhs for Justice and the World Sikh Organisation are at the forefront of promoting Sikh rights and memory politics. The assassination of notable figures such as Hardeep Singh Nijjar highlights the escalating tensions between diaspora activism and the Indian government. This research argues that the Neo-Khalistan movement is motivated more by symbolic assertion and resistance to perceived cultural assimilation than by territorial ambitions. Ultimately, it concludes that the movement signifies a dynamic redefinition of Sikh identity in response to ongoing political marginalisation and historical grievances.

Keywords

India, Khalistan, identity, Punjab, Khalsa, Sikh

Introduction

Social groups do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact within a social environment to form a functional society. Identity plays a significant role in the minority politics of India. One of the prominent minority groups with substantial political influence,

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shaping the course of Indian politics, is the Sikhs. The small state of Punjab, which hosts the majority of the global Sikh population, is situated between Pakistan and India. It possesses a rich history shaped by significant events, political movements, and religious revivalism. However, the region has also been a hotspot of violence and rebellion, both before and after Indian independence. The Khalistan movement stands out as the most prominent among these violent movements, marking a significant chapter in Punjab's history since the partition.

Sikh identity is rooted in its values and tradition of resisting oppression and remaining resilient to preserve the community's right to practice its faith. The longstanding tradition of fighting oppression and resisting the onslaught of authoritarian dictates from powerful elites has shaped the character of the Sikh community since the religion's founding by Guru Nanak Dev in the 16th century. Neo Khalistan is a continuation of the struggle for a Sikh-majority homeland, grounded in a strong sense of identity and a prolonged fight for recognition. It also seeks to highlight the hidden dynamics of oppression within the modern Indian polity, where Sikhs, being a minority now less than 2 per cent of the population, face significant challenges (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Sikhism, as a religion, has shaped the culture of its followers by introducing practices that were deeply ingrained in the community's consciousness, harnessing the perspective of a unified entity that takes shape as a nation or a *goum* in tradition. The Khalistan Movement is a sociopolitical force closely tied to Sikhism and plays a significant role in North Indian politics. The movement seeks to establish Sikhism as a unique religion and identity, separate from other beliefs (Kyumpyo, 2009). Over the years, Sikhism has faced numerous challenges from external sources and the influence of other religions. The struggle to preserve the teachings of the gurus led to the rise of puritanical movements and militancy in the past, which resulted in violence in Punjab in the last two decades of the previous century (Kyumpyo, 2009).

The movement for a separate Sikh homeland was violently suppressed by India in the 1980s and 1990s (Duggal & Chughtai, 2023). Violence that ensued during the militancy period is categorized as one of the bloodiest in modern Indian history, and it permanently altered the political landscape of North-West India. The decades of the 80s and 90s are marked by brutal suppression of the insurgency through violent means, marked by counter-insurgency operations, police encounters, and policing of the state of Punjab through laws and policies that silenced the Khalistan insurgency. However, the movement remained alive and adapted with time.

In present times, the Khalistan movement expresses itself in the form of resistance against the state policies by underscoring the political and systemic violence against the Sikh community by the central and state governments. The efforts to revive Khalsa traditions among Sikhs and a Gen Z interpretation of the Khalistan movement focus on identity, tradition, language, and religious nationalism, which the author has categorized as the Neo expression of the Khalistan movement. Neo Khalistan is a departure from the violent past of the movement by highlighting the patterns of suppression, systemic injustices, and marginalisation of the Sikh people. The movement focuses on the aspects that underscore the disenfranchisement of the Sikh population in India. Moreover, the movement has also found a strong support base in the diaspora, challenging India's multicultural image abroad.

The paper seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Sikh identity and its relevance within the larger framework of Indian politics and society by analysing the interaction of religion and culture in shaping the Sikh identity. It will

examine the intricate dynamics that gave rise to the Khalistan Movement, its modern expression, the historical development, and the struggle to preserve the values and customs of the community in India. The paper also aims to rationalise the demand of Sikhs for a separate homeland; the friction of the Khalistan movement with the secular institutions of India, backed by a secular constitution. Utilising a thorough examination of these complex variables, this paper aims to illuminate the ongoing significance of identity in moulding contemporary Sikh politics and the passive influence of the Khalistan movement on Sikhs in India and abroad.

The focus of this research is to highlight the history and impact of the Khalistan movement in Punjab and its neo-expressions. The study highlights the evolution of the Khalistan movement from its inception and how socio-political changes in modern times have shaped it into a social movement. The research paper also underscores the juxtaposition of the religious and social institutions in Punjab with the secular outlook of the Indian republic. The study also examines how the Khalistan movement in modern India is a call for the reclamation of the Sikh identity, which often expresses itself in the form of resistance towards the central government's policies, such as protests and separatism.

Methodology

The overall research design of the study follows a qualitative method to conceptualize the notion of the Khalistan movement. The research delves into the meanings associated with the religious and cultural symbolism that represent the movement today. The research uses primary and secondary sources, drawing on archival documents such as the British Guzattiers of Punjab, to analyse the demographic composition, political structures, and the impact of religious reform movements on the population of Punjab, particularly the Sikh population. The study also consults existing research including research papers, research reports, and opinion articles of area experts, to draw a qualitative analysis of the dynamics of the Sikh society over the decades, and how political, social, and religious movements have shaped the Punjab's society, particularly the various aspects of the Khalistan movement in History and the variables that shape the movement. The research paper also consults historical accounts recorded in books and news articles

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Constructivism emphasises both ideational and material structures to understand the systems in which we live. Along with the material resources, constructivists argue that ideational structures also exist and are as impactful. At the core of the theory of constructivism is the Agent-structure problem (Riegler, 2012). Constructivist scholars have explained the agent-structure problem in various ways and have provided detailed accounts of the mutual relationship between agents and structure. Agents give rise to structures, whereas structures impact the agency or the actions of agents in shaping the course of their social interaction with norms. Nonetheless, agents and structures are intertwined in a dynamic relation where they both rely on each other for change and are hence mutually constitutive (Dessler, 1989).

The agency gives options that might have unforeseen repercussions that could cause a change as a result of the agents' decisions or actions. Entities like societies or governments are created when a large number of agents act freely and with a significant degree of identity in pursuit of their common goals. Although the definition of rational behaviour is contextual and differs from society to society, constructivism also

maintains that people are rational actors. As defined by their society, its conventions, and their belief systems, the context is pertinent to the decisions made by the actors. As a result, individuals establish what makes sense to them, and their behaviour over longer periods that are adopted by others in society can both create new norms and uphold preexisting ones.

Imagine it as a nation with several buildings that symbolise its authority over the executive and governmental branches. Do the existence of these material structures or the significance that the people of that nation place on those material structures account for the state's existence? A society's institutions are largely shaped by the personalities of its actors. According to Nicholas Onuf (2013), rules have a constitutive nature and offer the social circumstances necessary for actors to interact with prevailing norms and principles to form a social identity. This implies that the actors' identities are flexible and subject to change throughout time. Identity and consistent practice patterns are, hence, the building blocks of the establishment of institutions. Identity and institutions are linked in a dynamic and ever-evolving way, according to Onuf's (2013) constructivist paradigm. As identities evolve, so too may institutional norms and regulations. Institutional development may be influenced by changes in identity-based decisions and attitudes across time. Institutions and identities are therefore mutually constitutive and subject to change throughout time, controlling a society's institutions and identities.

Social Constructivism and Identity

Social constructivism holds that identity is more than just a descriptive phrase; it is an element of social and political reality. The identities of individuals and groups influence their political inclinations, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as how they see themselves and others. Political institutions, customs, and practices are partially influenced by the identities of the individuals and groups participating in or affected by political processes. One of the main determinants of political behaviour is identity. Depending on their membership in particular social, cultural, or political groups, people commonly express their views, engage in political activities, and make decisions (Jung, 2019).

In his seminal work *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Francis Fukuyama claims that contemporary identity politics are rooted in the third component of the soul, which he refers to as thymos or spirit. In order to comprehend Thymos, Fukuyama (2018) explores Socratic philosophy in depth and draws from the *Republic*, a conversation between Socrates and his pupils. Questions about human concern towards external acknowledgement and a sense of belonging to a particular way of life are at the centre of the dialectical interplay between the two. The seat of resentment among those who do not feel a part of a collection and demand recognition for their inner self is the part of the human conscience that demands dignity and feels resentment when confronted with a contrast between the inner and outer worlds, according to Fukuyama (2018). Francis Fukuyama's concept of thymos, which represents the desire for dignity, respect, and acknowledgement, illustrates the undercurrents of the neo-Khalistan movement. One way to interpret Sikh politics' emphasis on identity is as a response to their marginalisation in the broader Indian environment. The Khalistan movement's genealogy also emphasises isothymia, or the pursuit of equal regard, even though this distinction has not been intentional. The desire for equality, autonomy, and dignity, particularly when certain groups feel they are not accorded the same status within a state, fuels the call for emancipation (Fukuyama, 2018).

What is Neo-Khalistan?

The Khalistan movement has always been symbolised by resistance to authority, and its advocacy groups have a strong sense of community and religious distinctness with its own set of unique institutions and traditions. Sikh identity is created through a complex interplay of political, cultural, and religious factors, purposefully distinguishing it from the broader Indian national identity embodied in the secular constitution. The neo-Khalistan movement represents a dynamic shift in the Sikh psyche, designating the perspectives of the recent generations on identity, autonomy, and nationalism. The movement has evolved into a politics of grievance and resentment, historically, often accompanied by a sentiment of marginalisation (Rai, 2011). It is a decentralized movement, drawing influences from the collective tragedies of the Operation Blue Star, the Sikh pogroms of 1984, and the violent insurgency ensuing these events. It deviates from the classical Khalistan movement, which was characterised by a struggle for a Sikh homeland through political, or if needed, violent means. The Neo-Khalistan movement is not just identity politics, but also the politics of resentment.

The Classical Khalistan Movement

The classical Khalistan movement predated Indian independence. It represents the anxiety of the small Sikh community in a region dominated by great religions (Kapur, 1987). It is a theocratic movement, which has its roots in the political struggle for the preservation and recognition of Sikhism and greater autonomy before and after the independence of India (Kapur, 1987). The Khalistan movement aims to pursue the foundation of a state where Sikhs can practice their faith under the guidance of the Granth Sahib and their religious institutions. The concept of *Granth-Panth*, which illustrates an inseparable relationship between the scripture of the Gurus and its relation to the community, forms one of the foundational principles. Identity is a central theme of the movement as the movement draws inspiration from the historical legacy of resistance to outside rule and the nostalgia for the Sikh Empire.

The movement went through phases of political upheavals and armed resistance. Tragic events like the Nankana massacre of 1923 and the Operation Blue Star, which are deeply rooted in the Sikh psyche, are connected to the community's desire to practice their religion under the autonomy of their religious institutions. Such historical events have shaped the Sikh community's outlook towards external political influence. In recent history, the Khalistan movement is deeply connected to the Operation Blue Star, in which the movement's leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and his followers were killed in a confrontation with the Indian army. The event left a deep impact on the Sikh psyche as the destruction of the Golden Temple during the operation and the ensuing counter-insurgency campaigns, orchestrated by the Indian army, state police forces, and the paramilitary forces, resulted in massive human rights violations that mark the contemporary perspectives of the Sikh community on authority and governance (Chopra, 2010). The persecution of Sikhs that followed the operation Blue Star and the subsequent assassination of Indra Gandhi serves as one of the most traumatic events in Sikh history (Pennington, 2012, pp. 149-156).

Classical versus Neo-Khalistan Movement

The neo expressions of the movement differ tremendously from its classical iterations. It represents the sentiments of the Sikhs as a people having a distinct religious and cultural identity, emphasising the significance of collective experience, shared history, and cultural values intertwined with the principles of Sikhism, and a more cosmopolitan

nature of the Sikh community (Dyke, 2009). Neo-Khalistan represents a shift from political violence to an ideational interpretation of the movement, emphasising the significance of the movement by focusing on Sikh identity. In a way, the Neo-Khalistan movement is a form of Identity politics that explores the roots of the Sikh identity under the pretext of its genealogy and contrast with the struggle between the distinctness of Sikh religious thought from Indian secularism and Hindutva in modern times (Grewal & Sabherwal, 2019). The movement also espouses the anti-imperial, post-colonial undertones, reflecting on the power dynamics of the structural violence that always puts the Sikh community at the receiving end (Grewal & Sabherwal, 2019). The modern iteration of the movement is a critique of the embedded injustices in the political structures of India, where political violence and systemic injustices are perpetrated against the Sikh community. Despite India's republicanism, the Sikh community feels largely disenfranchised, and there are voices of political marginalisation and underrepresentation. This concern has its roots in pre-independence India, which especially pertained to the politics of Punjab as a question of minority representation in the region.

More recently, the movement has made inroads into the socio-political milieu of Punjab. The guiding principles, which include submission to the temporal and spiritual wisdom of the divine as represented by the religious Institutions of Sikhism, have strongly shaped the Sikh identity and have remained entrenched in the tradition (Pashaura Singh & Fenech, 2014). A common denominator between the classical Khalistan movement and the neo-Khalistan movement remains the emphasis on Sikhism as a guiding principle for Sikhs to struggle for home rule. Sikhi, as a way of life, is a subordination to the scripture, i.e., Guru Granth Sahib, and is substantiated by the religious institutions, Such as the Akal Takht (the seat of temporal Authority) and the Harmandir Sahib (the political and divine wisdom has always been derived from these institutions since their foundation. Another difference is the unconventional means through which the movement propagates itself (Singh, 2021).

Unlike the past, when autonomy and representation were topics of discussion in mainstream politics, the Neo-Khalistan movement reflects on these issues in social-media campaigns, human rights advocacy, democratic exercises such as referendums, pop culture, protests, advocacy in the diaspora, and activism in the home state of Punjab. However, the emphasis on the concept of *Granth-Panth* and the primacy of the Khalsa remains a common theme. The state-declared Khalistan militants are revered as heroes and cultural icons, regularly appearing on social media and Punjabi music as cultural symbols of resistance and defiance (Khanna, 2023). In short, the aspiration for greater autonomy persists; however, the means to communicate that aspiration has changed, as in the past it was militancy, but today it is advocacy.

The Genesis of Sikhi and the Search for Identity

The Sikh identity, which has evolved over several centuries, is a unique blend of diverse influences. It has been shaped by the teachings of Guru Nanak, the reforms initiated by Guru Gobind Singh, the challenging times of Sikh persecution, and the martyrdom of the Sikh Gurus (Shani, 2000). The rich history and culture of the Sikh community have played a crucial role in shaping its identity. Sikhism found its differentiation from Hinduism in Strict monotheism and rejection of idol worship (Grewal, 1983). Early in the 16th century, the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, established the philosophical cornerstone of Sikhism. His teachings focused on the value of selfless service, the unity of God, and the equality of all people. Despite gaining from the influences of the great

religions of the Subcontinent and their reform movements at the time, Sikhism has a distinctively independent identity manifested by its unique socio-religious practices. The essence of the teachings of Guru Nanak and the influences of other religions on Sikhism is elaborated by Marian W. Smith (1948) as stated:

The intellectual and political atmosphere that surrounded Nanak's development was a peculiar blend of Hinduism and Mohammedanism. Born a Hindu, a Kshatriya or warrior by caste, he was reared in Punjab at a time when that area staggered under the full weight of Muslim influence. The initial conflict between the Hindu masses and Muslim conquerors was intensified by the latter's active program of conversion. Whether or not this program lived up to its full reputation for torture, its increasing success constituted a direct challenge to native religions. Nanak's answer was a reaffirmation of the spiritual essentials of Hinduism, plus an emphasis upon human dignity which has almost immediate repercussions in the political sphere. Nanak offered a doctrinal synthesis that answered the challenges of Islam and at the same time aimed at the very foundation of the top-heavy Brahmanical social structure. By emphasising an individualism already present in the Hindu tradition, he raised human dignity into a force which transcends other-worldly values, made excessive ritualism unnecessary, consecrated daily labour, and denied the validity of the caste system itself (pp. 457-462).

The period of Sikh persecution, especially under the Mughal monarchs, was a furnace that put the Sikh community's identity to the ultimate test. The Sikh community suffered greatly because of their unwavering refusal to abandon their beliefs in favour of the dominant religious dogma (Fenech, 2001). In this turbulent era marked by institutionalised discrimination and the enforcement of religious doctrines, the Sikhs remained steadfast in their dedication to Sikhism's core principles. The persecution also shaped how Sikhs interacted with outside forces; for instance, when Mughal emperor Aurangzeb executed Guru Teg Bahadur for accepting Islam on the invitation of the emperor, his son, Guru Gobind Singh, sought to protect the religion by calling the faithful to arms; however, he did not establish a martial tradition without justice (Kaur, 2007). Guru Gobind Singh introduced the concept of Sant Sipahi, or warrior saints, meaning Sikhs would defend their religion but never commit injustice in its name. To ensure this, he introduced beliefs and practices such as the Five Ks, which guided Sikhs in protecting their faith and opposing injustice. Sikhs remained firm in their distinctive religious identity amidst hardships, characterised by a unique blend of spiritual strength and a commitment to justice (Hew, 2008; Syan, 2014).

The Religious Revival of Sikhism in Later Periods

The 19th century Sikh reformation movements, such as the Singh Sabha Movement, underscore the emphasis on the foundational principles of Sikhi and re-enfranchised the Sikhs as a political and social force in pre-independence Punjab. Singh Sabha movement emerged to preach the gospel of returning to religious orthodoxy for two main reasons; one was the emergence of a Hindu renaissance movements such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj that had a significant impact on Punjab's society, and another was the dilution of the moral values of the Sikhs as the religion began to dilute with Hindu practices becoming more commonplace (Gupta, 1990).

The Singh Sabha movement arose to preserve the religious essence of Sikhism. The objective of the Singh Sabha movement was to re-educate Sikhs on the foundational principles of the religion and to re-establish the Sikh identity, which was losing its essence, mainly due to the syncretic practices seeping into Sikhism from Hinduism (Mahmood, 1989). The movement opposed the advances of Hindu movements like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj that aimed to integrate Sikhism within a wider Hindu religious framework. Swami Dayananda Saraswati established the Arya Samaj movement, a reformist Hindu organisation to revitalise and purify Hinduism. His arrival in Lahore and efforts to establish a strong base for his movement in Punjab, which included the denigration of Sikhism as a separate religion by Swami Dayanand, sparked a strong opposition to his movement by the Sikhs (Singh, 2018).

The dilution of Sikhism and its values into Hinduism was a cause for concern, which led to the re-emphasising of the core beliefs of Sikhism, particularly on the premise to distinguish itself as a separate religion and not an offshoot of Hinduism. The creolization and hybridity of Hinduism with Sikhism in Punjab had consequences for the religion, and its impact was felt by the Khalsa Sikhs more than any other denominations within Sikhism (Singh, 1982). One of its compelling examples is the presence of Hindu idols in Gurudwaras, a practice introduced by the Udasis, a denomination of Sikhism that emphasises mysticism and practices idol worship as a connection to God (Singh, 1982). The Ascetic sect was also in charge of the gurudwaras, which was not acceptable to the Sikh denominations, particularly Khalsa Sikhs, who denounced idol worship as a Hindu practice and distanced themselves from it by advocating strict monotheism (Singh, 2012). The Sikh intelligentsia felt compelled to reorient and restructure the Sikh society by educating their community.

The urgency to reform Sikhism stemmed from the fear that it might disappear due to various reasons, mainly because of syncretic practices creeping in from Hinduism (Gupta, 1990). The Singh Sabha movement started to campaign for Sikh rights in the 1870s after the fall of the Sikh Empire, based on the belief that the Khalsa had lost its prestige, and it was vital to safeguard the core values of Sikhism through social and religious reform. The influence of this reform movement became more evident in the later census of British India.

The Singh Sabha movement acted as a barrier against the cultural dominance of Hinduism in India. It not only re-educated Sikhs about their scripture but also sparked an academic revolution within Sikh society by formalising Sikh religious thought through modern education. The establishment of Khalsa Schools and colleges throughout Punjab, including the renowned Khalsa College at Amritsar, was a direct result of this reform movement. Another outcome of the Singh Sabha movement was the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (Khurana, 2019), the Akali movement, and the Gurdwara reform movement (Myrvold, 2024), which became defining moments for Sikh identity after independence.

The Sovereignty of the Divine in Sikh Institutions

Sikh movements for greater autonomy and separatism draw influences from the historical reformation and Sikh rights movements, which dominated Sikh politics and society before India's independence. These movements shed light on the origins and components of Sikh identity and played a significant role in shaping later efforts that would determine the community's future. The Singh Sabha movement's clarification of the distinction between Hinduism and Sikhism has emerged as a fundamental ideological divide between the Khalistan movement and its opponents, who position

themselves against Hindutva, a majoritarian radical ideology advocating a nation-state premised on majority rule, often at the expense of minority freedoms.

Institution building within Sikh society began prior to the influence of the reformation movements. These socio-religious institutions served as the focal point of the reform movement. Furthermore, movement for self-determination in Sikhism does not adhere to the principles of the Westphalian statecraft; it is, in fact, quite advanced in this regard, as Sikhs are a global community that has always integrated itself into multicultural societies from the beginning, and the Sikh Empire was a cosmopolitan society. However, the Sikhs have always retained their religious and social autonomy and resisted external political influences. Another contrast of Sikhism with a rigid theocratic monopoly like the Catholic Church is the presence of republican institutions that offer legitimacy to the *Qoum* (nation), which represents the collective consensus of the worldwide Sikh population. The political and religious authority is not mutually exclusive in Sikhism, as following the example of the Gurus, who were the political figureheads, along with being the religious leaders of the nation.

Historically, the Sikhs have believed in the decentralisation of political authority. The idea of collective sovereignty in Sikhism is supported by the Guru Granth-Guru Panth conception, where the community and the scripture determine the political discourse (Rai, 2011). Another illustration of decentralization among Sikhs is the establishment of the Sarbat Khalsa by the final Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. The convergence of the Guru Granth-Guru Panth occurs in the Sarbat Khalsa, a council of Sikh people convened to address the challenges faced by the community. The collective accord of the community elects the religious council and presents their views at the Akal Takht of the Harmandir Sahib, which is the spiritual seat of authority in Sikhism (Rai, 2011). The Akal Takht holds legitimacy over Sikh affairs and derives its authority from the consensus of the panth (community).

Hence, for Sikhs, their religious institutions hold more significance than any other form of political system. After the reform movements, such as the Singh Sabha movement and the Akali movement, the Sikh religious institutions became the key determinant of the social and political life of the Sikh community. Popular reform movements aimed to re-establish the Khalsa tradition of Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru of the religion, and his influence on Sikhism is both religious and political. The Khalistan movement's prominent figures, such as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and senior Akali Dal leader Harchand Singh Longowal, were all Khalsa Sikhs and strongly believed in the revival of the Khalsa tradition and in the service of the Khalsa Panth (community). Moreover, institutions like the Akal Takht and Sarbat Khalsa have always kept the social and political dynamics of the Sikh community restricted to the religious fold, and these institutions draw legitimacy from the community, deflecting other forms of political authority as interference.

Sikhs have upheld the primacy of the Akal Takht over any other social and political institutions and have responded with aversion to any intrusive state policy (Singh, 2021). It is particularly evident in India, where the Sikh population is mostly concentrated around the holy sites. Sikhs around the world have shown respect to the law of the nations where they reside; however, Representation by the community's chosen representatives is regarded as superior to any democratic or elected form of representation, and outside meddling is repelled, as the Sikh value system does not entertain external meddling in the religious affairs of the community. Sikh history is marked by events in which Sikhs have protested for their religious rights against state authority. One of its prime examples is the Akali movement in the 1920s for the

management of the gurudwaras by the Sikh community as opposed to the colonial government. The violent struggle for a separate Sikh homeland on the model of a Westphalian state with defined territory and population was a reaction to the intervention by the Indian polity to assimilate the Sikhs into the Indian national sphere, where the primacy of the constitution and secular institutions would become a governing principle, rather than the community's own recognised institutions. In a way, the Indian constitution and secular institutions were juxtaposed by the Guru Granth - Guru Panth under a sovereign Akal Takht

Revival of the Khalistan Movement in India and Abroad

The primacy of the religious institutions and the interaction with the nation-state system have shaped the Sikh perception of autonomy. Within India, the modern iterations of the Khalistan movement demand Khalistan not just as a theocratic state, but also as an ethno-religious construct that represents the religious, cultural, and linguistic dynamics of the state of Punjab. As opposed to the movement's dynamics in the 80s, its emphasis is rooted in Sikh identity and the historical legacy of the Sikh resistance to external intervention. One of the leading differences that distinguishes neo-Khalistan from the classical variant is the role of the Sikh diaspora in propagating the movement. After its brutal suppression in Punjab by the central government, many advocates of Sikh right to self-determination found their support base among the diaspora, mainly situated in the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but remained deeply connected to the homeland.

The discourse on the Khalistan movement has majorly shifted from India to the Sikh diaspora community. The diaspora plays a crucial role in advocating for Sikh rights in the West (Hayat et al., 2024). Many overseas Sikh organisations are labelled as a threat to national security by the Indian government; however, these groups deny India's allegations and raise concerns about the Sikh community being deprived of their fundamental human rights in India. Social evils in Punjab, such as a rampant drug epidemic and worsening law and order situation, are attributed to the neglect of the central state governments by the Sikh rights organizations. Moreover, these organizations also highlight the religious and racial profiling of Sikhs as a threat to national security by the Indian government as a serious human rights violation. These émigré organisations and rights groups largely remain peaceful and are not considered a threat by the governments of their respective countries.

The clash of identities is more visible in the rhetoric of the Sikh advocacy groups based in North America and Europe, as these organizations decry the plight of religious minorities under a government that espouses the Hindutva ideology (Hayat et al., 2024). Many rights organisations, regarded as terrorist sympathisers by India, promote justice and self-determination for Sikhs in India. For example, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) strongly criticises the Indian government for the Sikh Massacres of 1984, highlights systemic injustices against Sikhs in India, and advocates for a non-binding Sikh referendum on self-determination. Other rights organisations, Such as World Sikh Organisation (WSO), provide legal advocacy for Sikh rights in India and across the world. WSO also highlights the human rights violations perpetrated by the Indian government and holds remembrance days for the tragic events of Operation Blue Star and the Pogroms against Sikhs in 1984 (Purewal, 2012).

Many Sikh dissidents have been the victims of assassination attempts. One of the most notable cases is the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2024). A Canadian Sikh leader and outspoken advocate for a separate

homeland for Sikhs, Nijjar was a prominent figure within his community in Canada who championed the Sikh people's right to self-determination (Stepansky, 2025). Hardeep Singh Nijjar was one of the activists involved with advocacy organisations for Sikhs in the diaspora. Other prominent figures include Gurpatwant Singh Pannu in the US; Bhai Amrik Singh and Gurcharan Singh are vocal leaders of these advocacy groups. Nijjar's assassination sparked a new momentum in the Khalistan movement, leading to diplomatic tensions between India and Canada, as the Canadian government accused India of involvement (Cecco, 2025). This diplomatic fallout resulted in the expulsion of diplomatic staff by both nations (Al Jazeera, 2024). The killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar deeply angered Sikhs both in India and abroad, fostering resentment that has persisted since the turbulent decades of 80s and 90s.

Recent voices within the Sikh community reflect on the complexity of the identity crisis of the Sikhs and the mistrust of the community in the government institutions. The contemporary Khalistan movement highlights the juxtaposition between Indian political structures and Sikh aspirations for autonomy, which has historically manifested in demands for greater autonomy and separatism. Vocal proponents of the movement today, like Amritpal Singh, decry the social decay of the Sikh society. He speaks about the rampant drug abuse and violent crimes in Punjab, and for him and his followers, the cause of the moral decay of the Sikh society is due to the deviation of the *Panth* (community) from the core values of *Sikhi*. The modern Khalistan movement believes in a religious revival and a return to orthodox Sikhism to rid the Sikh community of all social evils, which is not possible without self-determination (Fareed & Ali, 2024). Moreover, the proponents of the movement also make strong criticism of the rise of Hindutva and saffronisation of India, as a threat to the social and constitutional status of minority religions of India, which brings the movement into a confrontation with the far-right BJP government (Rai, 2011).

In comparison to the past, the revival of the movement in the 21st century did not result in militancy, but rather in opposition to the authority of the central government and a mistrust of the state government's policies. The successive governments in the center and in Punjab have faced criticism from the Sikh community's clergy and political figures for being interventionist and disrupting their religious autonomy. This juxtaposition forms the basis of the contemporary interpretation of the Khalistan movement. Moreover, the legacy of the structural violence perpetrated through state institutions during the period of militancy marks a significant resentment towards the methods of governmentality by the Sikh community. Furthermore, the underlying causes of distress within the community go beyond militancy and separatism. Other structural causes, like the lack of industrialization in Punjab, agricultural distress among the farmers, a rampant drug epidemic, and the historic claims over territory like Chandigarh and Punjabi-speaking districts in bordering states, have significant influences on the community's collective conscience. Such issues form the foundation of the Sikh resentment towards the power structures in contemporary Indian politics.

Conclusion

The revival of Sikh identity in contemporary times, often encapsulated in the term *Neo-Khalistan*, represents more than a call for territorial sovereignty; it is an evolving assertion of religious, cultural, and political selfhood in response to historical marginalization and present-day challenges. The Khalistan movement did not appear in a vacuum, but as an outcome of the socio-political dynamics of Indian society. It has

its roots in the pre-independence struggle for identity and the post-independence struggle for greater autonomy for the Sikhs in India. The movement represents an extreme approach to social and political reform, grounded in reformist efforts such as the Singh Sabha and Gurdwara Reform Movements. This reawakening draws heavily from collective memory, spiritual autonomy, and resistance to perceived assimilation into dominant religious or national narratives. The cultural autonomy emphasized by the movement is an expression of the collective memory of the Sikh community, which has its roots in the history of social and political development of their identity.

Moreover, while the original Khalistan movement was largely territorial and insurgent in nature, its modern iteration, particularly among the Sikh diaspora, is marked by symbolic nationalism, digital advocacy, and legal-political mobilisation. The martyrdom of figures like Hardeep Singh Nijjar and the resurgence of historical grievances post-1984 continue to fuel this identity-based momentum. Yet, the Neo-Khalistan discourse is not monolithic. It encompasses diverse strands, from calls for justice and preservation of Sikh distinctiveness to critiques of Indian majoritarianism and efforts to reclaim narrative space globally. In this sense, Neo-Khalistan is less a secessionist project and more a dynamic, transnational assertion of Sikh agency, one that navigates the complex intersections of memory, modernity, and marginalisation.

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